

Frontline Accounts of Oil Spill Differ from Official Account on Key Points

WASHINGTON. D.C. – House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Ranking Member Darrell Issa (R-CA) [released a report today](#) [entitled, “How the White House Public Relations Campaign on the Oil Spill is Harming the Actual Clean-Up,”](#) that reports the conclusions from the Committee’s recent fact-finding exercise on the Louisiana coast that uncovered evidence that Administration officials have misrepresented key facts including the number of assets dedicated to cleaning up the spill, the timing of when officials knew about the oil leak, the extent to which the federal government has been in control, and the effectiveness of its command structure. Furthermore, local officials in Louisiana fear and evidence suggests that, in addition to being unprepared for the upcoming hurricane season, policy decisions made by this Administration, including the drilling moratorium and an apparent refusal to waive the union-backed Jones Act, will stifle economic recovery in the region for years to come.

“This report reveals a stark contrast between the narrative being told by the Administration in Washington and the sobering realities and challenges that the people closest to this catastrophe are struggling to overcome,” said Issa. “These testimonials from the people who are on the

frontlines of this crisis have brought to light a bureaucratic quagmire that is exacerbating the response and clean-up effort - in a post-Katrina world, this is unimaginable and unacceptable. The evidence on the ground suggests that the White House has been more focused on the public relations of this crisis than with providing local officials the resources they need to deal with it.”

Recently, Ranking Member Issa and the panels’ Chairman Edolphus Towns (D-NY) visited the Gulf of Mexico to survey the damage caused by the Deepwater Horizon explosion and the resulting oil leak. At the Unified Area Command center in Robert, Louisiana they received formal briefings from BP, Coast Guard, and various federal government representatives assessing the situation on the ground. Committee staff remained in the region and conducted a series of interviews with local leaders from Jefferson Parish, St. Bernard’s Parish, and Lafourche Parish. Jefferson Parish is the most populous Parish in the state and was hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. It is also described as “ground zero” in the battle against the oil spill due to tidal patterns. St. Bernard Parish was flooded levee-to-levee in the wake of Katrina. Of its 27,000 homes, only five remained untouched by Katrina’s flood waters. Lafourche Parish is home to Port Fourchon, a low lying coastal city at the intersection of the Bayou Lafourche and the Gulf of Mexico.

Pursuant to this review, staff has found numerous instances in which the situation on the ground conflicts with official reports. Of enormous concern, the situation in the Gulf is actually more dysfunctional and dire than what has been portrayed through official reports and press accounts based on official information. This blurring of reality is exacerbating problems with the clean-up effort.

The following key findings are based upon witness interviews and documents provided by federal and state entities to Committee investigators:

- Officials on the ground dispute key White House assertions about the number and timeliness of assets deployed in the Gulf. Local officials describe White House outreach efforts as more focused on stopping bad press than on addressing the disaster at hand;

- The White House's assurances that there are adequate resources are at odds with the reality on the ground, where those on the frontline of the spill express significant frustration over the lack of assets. Local complaints are supported by the fact that the White House waited until Day 70 of the oil spill to accept critical offers of international assistance. Local workers and boats could have been assisting more with the clean-up if the Federal government had provided them with needed supplies and equipment;

- While the White House has tried to use the delay in finding a visible leak to explain its early silence on the oil spill, Transocean officials and Coast Guard documents from the scene of the oil spill reveal clear and early indications of a substantial oil leak days earlier than White House accounts;

- The failure of Administration officials to quickly waive laws preventing necessary foreign assets from reaching the Gulf and other regulations are hampering efforts to clean-up and limit damage from the oil spill. Local officials feel the federal government is making the perfect the enemy of the good in cleanup efforts;

- Local officials strongly dispute President Obama's insistence that the federal government – and not BP – has been in control since day one. One Coast Guard Admiral told congressional investigators that decisions on the ground are made through a “consensus-based” process with BP. In practice, the Federal Government is not in charge of oil spill response efforts through a command-and-control approach

- Local officials strongly believe the President's call for a drilling moratorium will significantly compound the economic damage caused by the oil spill and will actually increase risk associated with future offshore drilling projects.

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